China vows to 'protect safety of foreigners' amid row with Japan

BEIJING: Beijing vowed on Tuesday to "protect the safety" of foreigners in China after Tokyo warned Japanese visitors "to be careful" in the country amid a diplomatic row.

The spat between China and Japan was ignited by Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi's suggestion that Tokyo could intervene militarily in any attack on Taiwan.

China reacted furiously to Takaichi's comments.

Asked about the warning to Japanese visitors, foreign ministry spokeswoman Mao Ning said the "Chinese government has always and will continue to protect the safety of foreign citizens in China in accordance with the law". The planned screening of two Japanese movies will be postponed in China, state media reported.

The comments came as Masaaki Kanai, the top official in Japan's foreign ministry for Asia-Pacific affairs, held talks in Beijing with his Chinese counterpart Liu Jinsong over Takaichi's comments.

Mao said Beijing had reiterated a "strong protest" with Tokyo in the discussions.

"During the consultations, China once again lodged a strong protest with Japan regarding Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi's erroneous remarks concerning China," Mao said.

"Takaichi's fallacies seriously violate international law and the basic norms governing international relations," Mao said, adding her comments "fundamentally damage the political foundation of China-Japan relations".—AFP

NEW DELHI: Demonstrators hold placards during a protest over the Indian government's failure to take steps for controlling air pollution.—Reuters

Nato tests new anti-drone defences to counter Russia

NOWA DEBA: Polish troops launched a drone from the back of a pick-up truck on Tuesday as they trained some 100 kilometres from the Ukrainian border to use a new US-made system designed to counter the threat from Russia.

Guided by a pilot, the unmanned craft swooped through the winter sky on the hunt to destroy its target: a simulated version of one of the attack drones Moscow regularly uses against Ukraine.

The deployment of the Merops system is part of Nato's hurried efforts to shore up its eastern flank after the alliance scrambled jets in September to shoot down Russian drones over Poland.

That incident, followed by a string of unexplained drone flights that rattled other European countries, served as a wake-up call of the continent's vulnerabilities almost four years after Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

In response, Nato has bolstered its forces nearest Russia and the European Union has hastily drawn up plans to build a system of anti-drone defences.

Plugging the gaps

On Nato's recommendation, Poland and fellow eastern flank country Romania have quickly acquired a handful of the Merops systems to help plug the gaps in the short-term.

The technology, produced by a firm backed by ex-Google CEO Eric Schmidt, has already proved its worth downing Russian drones in Ukraine.

"The system is one of the most effective killers of Russia's Shahed drones," US General Curtis King told journalists invited to view the training at a Polish military base, referring to Iranian-designed drones Russia is using massively.

"We estimate it is responsible for 40 per cent of those drones killed in Ukraine." Crucially, it is also relatively cheap.

Back in September Nato was forced to use its latest F-35 fighter jets firing missiles worth a million dollars each to down Russian drones costing tens of thousands of dollars.

That was clearly unsustainable given that the Kremlin has regularly sent swarms of hundreds of such drones into Ukraine.

In comparison the drones fired by the Merops system only cost some $15,000 each.

The Merops — which can use artificial intelligence to target enemy drones — is just one of numerous similar systems that Nato countries are testing as they seek to rush more capabilities into use.

Gap-filler

Polish, Romanian and US troops underwent some 20 days of training to be able to handle it.

"Once you get your hands on, it's pretty simple to catch on," said US sergeant Corey Myers.

"For our younger kids, as long as you're good with an Xbox controller, it's very intuitive."

Given the limited number of such anti-drone systems in Nato hands and the huge areas it has to defend, there is little chance of making the alliance's eastern flank airtight against Russian incursions.

"To defend such a vast area effectively, I think it might almost be impossible," said Robert Tollast, a military expert at the UK's RUSI think tank.

Instead officials and analysts say the systems could be best used deployed around key sites like power stations, airports and military bases.

That means they could help serve to deter the sort of drone disruptions seen recently in countries such as Denmark, Germany and Belgium.

With the EU's push to develop its own capacities likely to take time, Polish commanders said they see the US system as a stepping stone.

"This system is now battle-tested in Ukraine, and the results there are very encouraging. So we decided to get it as a gap-filler," said Gen Stanislaw Czosnek, deputy commander of the Polish armed forces.—AFP

UN says it needs billions of dollars to fight hunger

ROME: The UN's World Food Programme warned on Tuesday that funding cuts mean it will struggle to feed even a third of the 318 million people facing severe hunger in 2026.

"Declines in global humanitarian funding are forcing WFP to prioritise food assistance to roughly one third of those in need," targeting 110 million of the most vulnerable, it said in a statement.

That would cost $13 billion, the agency estimated — but warned that "current funding forecasts indicate WFP may only receive close to half that goal".

The WFP's largest donor is the United States, which, under President Donald Trump, has cut foreign aid, including to UN agencies. Other big donors, including some European nations, have also shrunk their humanitarian budgets.

The 318 million people facing acute hunger are more than double the figure recorded in 2019, as conflict, extreme weather, and economic instability have taken their toll, the WFP said.

UN agencies this year declared famine in Gaza and parts of Sudan, something that WFP executive director Cindy McCain called "completely unacceptable in the 21st century".

In a foreword to the WFP's 2026 Global Outlook report, she said the world's response "remains slow, fragmented and underfunded".

"Global aid now covers less than half of total needs, with steep reductions in food assistance. Almost all operations have had to cut food and cash, and prioritise which vulnerable groups receive help," she wrote.

"At the same time, attacks on aid workers have surged, revealing a growing disregard for international humanitarian law." For those facing hunger in 2026, 41 million people are classified as facing emergency or worse levels.

Last week, both UN food agencies — WFP and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) — warned of 16 "hunger hotspots" around the globe, from Haiti to South Sudan, saying that funding shortfalls were worsening already dire conditions.—AFP

Cambridge Dictionary chooses 'parasocial' as word of the year

LONDON: Do you feel a deep bond with pop stars like Taylor Swift or Lily Allen — even though you've never met them? If you do, then your behaviour is "parasocial" and bang on trend according to the Cambridge Dictionary, which on Tuesday unveiled the adjective as its word of the year for 2025.

Lexicographers picked it in a year they said was marked by interest in the one-sided parasocial relationships that people form with celebrities, influencers, and AI chatbots.

Parasocial is defined as "involving or relating to a connection that someone feels between themselves and a famous person they do not know".

The term dates back to 1956, when two University of Chicago sociologists noted television viewers developing parasocial relationships with television personalities, who they viewed in the same way as close friends or family.

As artificial intelligence becomes an ever-increasing part of people's lives, "slop" refers to low-quality AI-generated content. New entrants to the Cambridge Dictionary, meanwhile, included "skibidi", "delulu", and "tradwife".

The three were among "6,212 new words, phrases and meanings" included in the online dictionary over the past 12 months, it said.

The dictionary only adds words that are thought to have "staying power", according to one of its lexicographers, Colin McIntosh.

"Internet culture is changing the English language, and the effect is fascinating to observe and capture in the dictionary," he said.—AFP

Eswatini received $5.1m to accept US deportees

JOHANNESBURG: Eswatini received $5.1 million from the US government under a deal to accept third-country nationals deported by the Trump administration, its finance minister said on Tuesday.

Eswatini is among several African nations that agreed to receive third-country deportees as part of President Donald Trump's crackdown on illegal immigration. Others include South Sudan, Ghana, and Rwanda.

Details of the agreements have not been disclosed, and Eswatini's government is facing a lawsuit from human rights lawyers who claim the secretive deal was unconstitutional.

Finance Minister Neal Rijkenberg confirmed the $5.1 million figure in a text message but declined to give further details, saying the transaction was handled by the prime minister and that he was unaware of it until afterwards.

The document said that the US would provide Eswatini with $5.1 million to "build its border and migration management capacity" and that in exchange, Eswatini would accept up to 160 third-country deportees.—Reuters

Divided Spain marks 50 years since Franco's death

MADRID: Spain marks the 50th anniversary of Gen Francisco Franco's death on Thursday, with political polarisation exacerbating deep-rooted and bitter divisions over the dictator's legacy.

On Nov 20, 1975, an ailing 82-year-old Franco died peacefully in bed, in stark contrast to the brutality of his 36-year regime that saw opponents imprisoned, executed, and exiled.

He had also seized power through violence, overthrowing a democratic republic with the backing of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy in a 1936-1939 civil war that killed hundreds of thousands.

The country's path from dictatorship to democracy was fraught with difficulty over his memory, and a sweeping 1977 amnesty that benefited all sides sought to ease these tensions.

Since then, Spain has preferred "tiptoeing" around its painful past and is yet to hold a calm debate to agree on a shared position, said Paloma Roman, a political science professor at Madrid's Complutense University.

"If you sweep the dust under the carpet instead of cleaning up, when you take away the carpet, the dust will be there," said Roman.

A survey last month laid bare the enduring societal fractures Franco left behind, with a majority considering the dictatorship bad.

But more than one-fifth of respondents described it as "good" or "very good", in line with inaccurate social media content that has spurred praise among young people with scant knowledge of the period, experts warn.

"It's an education problem... The people who did not live through the dictatorship can be sucked into that narrative of rewriting the dictatorship," said Roman.

Political battle

Current political polarisation has embittered those existing divisions, according to Roman.

The leftist government has made honouring the memory of the regime's victims one of its flagship policies — to the fury of the conservative opposition that accuses it of reopening old wounds.

In 2019, Socialist Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez's govenment exhumed remains from an imposing mausoleum near Madrid constructed on Franco's orders, in a bid to end its role as a triumphalist far-right shrine.

A 2022 democratic memory law created a register of victims and requires the removal of Francoist symbols from public spaces. This year, the government has promoted events to commemorate 50 years of freedom gained since Franco's death, including full rights for women and the LGBTQ community.

'Franco card'

The right-wing main opposition Popular Party accuses Sanchez of playing "the Franco card" to distract attention from corruption scandals affecting his relatives and the minority government, which struggles to pass legislation.

Far-right Vox, the third-largest formation in parliament, has described the government as "the worst" in 80 years — a period that includes Franco's dictatorship.

No official commemorative events are planned for Nov 20, but the Francisco Franco Foundation and the late dictator's family have organised a mass on that day to honour his memory.

The fascist Falange movement has planned a march in Madrid on Friday, with an anti-fascist counter-protest organised on Saturday in another sign of tensions over Franco's memory.—AFP

NEWSMAKERS

LONDON: Conservative Party leader Kemi Badenoch and MP Robert Jenrick stand near a cow as they join a protest by British farmers opposing the government's plans to impose an inheritance tax.—Reuters

LEEDS (Britain): A protester is carried away by policeman after taking part in a demonstration in support of "Defend Our Juries" and their campaign against the ban on Palestine Action.—AFP

SANGITA Santosh (right), who dropped out of school to manage household chores, walks home with her sister after fetching pots of water from a village in the drought-prone district of Nandurbar, Maharashtra.—AFP

Education for girls hit hard by India's drying wells

NANDURBAR: Each morning, 17-year-old Ramati Mangla sets off barefoot with a steel pot in hand, walking several kilometres to fetch water from a distant spring in India's Maharashtra state. By the time she returns, school has already started.

"I have kept my books," she said. "But what if I never get a chance to go back?" In the drought-hit villages of Maharashtra's Nashik and Nandurbar districts, wells are drying up and rainfall has become increasingly erratic — forcing families to adapt to harsher living conditions. As men migrate to nearby cities in search of work, girls like Mangla are left to take on the responsibility of collecting water.

It's a chore that can take hours each day and leaves little time for school.

Local officials estimate that nearly two million people in these regions face daily water shortages.

A 2021 UNESCO report warned that climate-related disruptions could push millions of girls out of classrooms.

Many families, struggling to survive, see no option but to keep their daughters at home or marry them early.

"Children living in drought-prone areas, with family responsibilities for fetching water, struggle with attending school regularly, as collecting water now takes a longer time due to water scarcity and pollution," the UN children's fund wrote in a report.

For Mangla and many other girls across India, climate change is turning the simple act of fetching water into a choice between survival and education.—AFP

OTTAWA: Canada's Foreign Minister Anita Anand (left) greets King Carl XVI Gustaf of Sweden during a ceremony at Rideau Hall. The Swedish royal family arrived in Ottawa on Tuesday to begin a three-day state visit.—AFP

JAKARTA: Greenpeace activists take action at sea in front of the Muara Karang gas-fired power plant, protesting against the inconsistency of Indonesia's energy policies and calling for an end to dependence on fossil fuels.—AFP